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When School Ends, Weight Gain Begins

HEALTH ADVOCATES URGE KIDS TO “POWER UP YOUR SUMMER!”

The *Network for a Healthy California—Children’s Power Play! Campaign* is launching the new “Power Up Your Summer!” Challenge in partnership with local community youth organizations aimed at encouraging kids to add more active PLAY! and eat more fruits and vegetables this summer.

Kids gain weight more than twice as fast during the summer as they do during the regular school year, according to a 2007 report in the American Journal of Public Health that studied body mass indices (BMIs) for kindergarteners and first graders. The difference between school and summer gain rates was especially large for three at-risk subgroups: Black and Hispanic children, as well as those already overweight.¹

“The study’s findings suggest that children benefit from school’s structured environment, which includes scheduled meals, snacks and recess,” said Pamela Sit, MSPS, San Bernardino County Department of Public Health Educator for the *Power Play! Campaign*. “In contrast, children at home during summer break may have continuous access to snacks, are less likely to get consistent or active PLAY! and may spend more time watching television and playing video games, which burn few calories.”

¹ “The Effect of School on Overweight in Childhood: Gain in Body Mass Index During the School Year and During Summer Vacation,” American Journal of Public Health, April 2007.

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The issues raised are even more urgent when considering that childhood obesity rates in the United States have tripled over the past 20 years² and that overweight children often become overweight adults, more vulnerable to the wide range of health problems associated with obesity.³

To combat the so-called “Summer Slump” in physical activity and healthy eating, the Boys and Girls Club of San Bernardino are participating in the Power Up Your Summer! Challenge. According to president and CEO A. Majadi , youth involved in the Power Up Challenge will engage in fun Play! activities, such as hula-hoop, jump rope, and dancing, and record their PLAY! minutes on a central board at the 9th Street Boys and Girls Club.

“Our goal is to demonstrate how easy it is to Power Up Your Summer! with active PLAY!,” Pamela Sit said. “We’re encouraging kids and families to just get moving together by going to the park, walking, playing sports, riding bicycles or even hula hooping—anything that makes your heart beat faster.”

According to the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, kids should get 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity every day, but this doesn’t have to be all at once. Kids can add up the different active things they do during the day. However, they are encouraged to try to PLAY! for at least 10 minutes at a time.

One of the best ways for parents to help kids get active and maintain healthy eating habits is by enrolling them into a summer activity program, which provides scheduled PLAY! and snacks, as well as a safe place for children to learn and grow while parents work.

Other ideas to Power Up Your Summer! include:

- Identifying safe outdoor places for kids to PLAY!, such as parks, recreation centers, pools or even a mall or other enclosed shopping area.
- If kids can’t get outside, encouraging active indoor playtime such as turning on their favorite music and dancing, cheerleading, skipping, climbing stairs, doing jumping jacks, jogging in place or playing freeze dance, limbo, hopscotch or hide-and-seek.
- Incorporating physical activity into the family’s routine such as a daily walk or bike ride together. Or, make time to walk the dog or go swimming together.
- Adding delicious summer fruits and vegetables to every meal.

² “Prevalance and Trends in Overweight among U.S. Children and Adolescents,” Journal of the American Medical Association, October 2002.

³ “Childhood Body Mass Index Gain During the Summer Versus During the School Year,” New Directions for Youth Development, Summer 2007

- Providing kids with easy access to fruit and vegetable snacks, by keeping a bowl of fruit on the counter and pre-cut fruits and vegetables in the refrigerator.
- Limiting screen time to less than two hours per day. Time spent watching television, playing video games or surfing the Internet displaces physical activity and exposes children to advertisements for high-calorie, low-nutrition foods.

“Parents also need to be extra vigilant about what children eat during the summer,” Pamela Sit said. “Keep healthy snacks within reach, such as cantaloupe, strawberries, watermelon, cucumbers, carrots, celery, tomatoes, and other summer fruits and veggies. These are not only delicious but are generally inexpensive this time of year and a great way to eat right when money’s tight.”

The *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* recommends that elementary school children eat two-and-a-half to five cups of fruits and vegetables every day. Specific guidelines for children based upon age, gender, and activity level can be found at <http://www.MyPyramid.gov/kids/index.html>.

Ultimately, adding more active PLAY! and eating more fruits and vegetables not only beats the “Summer Slump” and childhood obesity, but helps kids feel good, reduce stress, improve strength and increase self-esteem—all benefits that last far beyond the summer break.

About the *Network for a Healthy California—Children’s Power Play! Campaign*

The *Network for a Healthy California—Children’s Power Play! Campaign* motivates and empowers California’s low-income 9- to 11-year-old children to eat more fruits and vegetables and get at least 60 minutes of physical activity every day. This statewide social marketing initiative is led by the California Department of Public Health’s *Network for a Healthy California* to improve children’s short-term health and reduce their long-term risk of chronic diseases, especially obesity, type 2 diabetes, cancer, and heart disease. Funding is from the USDA Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly the Food Stamp Program). For food stamp information, call 877-847-3663. For important nutrition information visit www.cachampionsforchange.net.

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